



THE WORD OF GOD IN PURITAN NEW ENGLAND: SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY PERSPECTIVES ON THE NATURE AND AUTHORITY OF THE BIBLE

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Those who would truly understand what American Puritanism was all about would do well to give heed to the sources from which the Puritans drew their ideas. It should come as no surprise that the principal source of Puritan ideology was the Bible itself. What is surprising is the way in which some historians, most notably the late Perry Miller, have ignored or minimized the Puritans' biblicism while attempting to unearth non-biblical roots for Puritan concepts. Instead of accepting the Puritans' own statements about their reliance on Scripture, Miller turned to more humanistic sources. In his massive work *The New England Mind: The 17th Century*, he makes passing comments about the Puritan acceptance of Scripture, but his emphasis is on "the four quarries from which the Puritan scholars carved out their principal ideas and doctrines"—European Protestantism, special interests and preoccupations of the seventeenth century, humanism, and medieval scholasticism.¹

The Puritans obviously did not operate in a cultural vacuum; they could not help but be influenced by the intellectual and cultural climate of their day. Miller, however, apparently ignored their own appraisal of the role of Scripture in their lives and

¹For the quotations in this and the following introductory paragraph, plus other related concepts, see Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: The 17th Century*, 2d ed. (Cambridge, Mass., 1954), pp. 7, 92, 108, 190, 310, 341. A welcome exception to the tendency to minimize the role of Scripture and faith is a perceptive article by George M. Marsden, "Perry Miller's Rehabilitation of the Puritans: A Critique," *CH* 39 (1970): 91-105.

thought, concluding that “they said in one moment that everything was to be gained by going to the Bible for the articles of belief” while “in the next they went also to other books, to systematic treatises on divinity, to methodized tomes on doctrine and ethics, to classical antiquity, to medieval scholasticism or to monumental restatements of it.” Miller felt that under the influence of the logician Petrus Ramus, the Puritans held that “the Bible should be approached exactly as should the natural world, as a welter of raw material out of which the propositions of art were to be refined by the process of invention and disposition.” In fact, it was Miller’s view that Puritan divines believed that “no man could understand Scripture who had not been schooled in rhetoric as well as in logic”—this despite the Puritan clergy’s frequent assertions of the plainness of Scripture and the role of the Spirit of God in revealing biblical truths to the reader.

1. *Puritan Declarations on Authority of Scripture*

In spite of twentieth-century attempts to secularize and rationalize Puritan theology, the fact remains that the absolute authority ascribed to the Bible and its consequent central place in Puritan theology were clearly and consistently declared by the seventeenth-century clergy of New England. This authority of Scripture was such a certainty to Puritan minds that even in stating their doctrine of biblical authority, men whom Miller described as eminently rational and logical did not hesitate to use the Scriptures themselves as the weightiest evidence to determine and support their view of the nature of the Bible.² Indeed, to Puritan divines, the authority of the Bible was so important and so obvious that even to raise question on the matter was to succumb to “strange temptations, hellish blasphemies.”³

The authority accorded to the Bible was a direct result of the Puritans’ belief in its divine authorship. According to Increase

²See, e.g., Cotton Mather, *A Scriptural Catechism* (Boston, 1691), p. 1; Increase Mather, *Angelographia* (Boston, 1696), p. 44.

³Thomas Shepard, *The Sound Believer* (Boston, 1736), p. 64. This work was written in the seventeenth century but not published until many years after Shepard’s death.

Mather, the Bible

ought to be received on that sole account of the Authority of the Speaker. Hence often in the Scripture, it is said, Hear the Word of the LORD, and Thus saith the LORD: Intimating that because of the Authority of the Speaker, men have infinite Reason to Hear and Fear, and to Believe and Obey.⁴

Nathaniel Gookin of Cambridge, Massachusetts, urged his New England flock to believe firmly that biblical injunctions were "the commands of the great God and his authority is stamped upon them."⁵ Boston's Samuel Willard, while quoting the words of David in the OT, was quick to point out that "they were not his own words, but such as the Spirit of God dictated to him, and spake by him, whereof he was only the Instrument of their being committed to record. They therefore came out of the Mouth of God. . . ."⁶ Increase Mather on one occasion spoke of the Scriptures as "the word of Christ. . . because Hee is ye Author of it."⁷

The very nature of the biblical message made its divine origin evident to Puritan eyes. Said Thomas Shepard, minister at Cambridge, "There is such a majesty stirring, and such secrets revealed in the Word, that if men will not be willfully blind, they cannot but cry out, 'The voyce of God, and not the voyce of man.'"⁸ Assurance that the Scriptures were the Word of God could further be seen "from the majesty, glory, holyness, truth of a God which shines forth in them."⁹ According to Increase Mather, only God could have authored the Bible because "there is such a Divine majesty to be seen in it, as is not in any other Book. . . . The Scripture is His Word, for

⁴Increase Mather, *The Latter Sign Discoursed of In A Sermon Preached at the Lecture of Boston in New England; August 31, 1682* (Boston, 1682), p. 19.

⁵Nathaniel Gookin, Sermon [May or June, 1690], *Sermon Notes*, Apr. 24-Aug. 13, 1690, recorded by John Hancock, Harvard University MS, pp. 85, 90-91.

⁶Samuel Willard, *The Character of a Good Ruler* (Boston, 1694), p. 5.

⁷Increase Mather, Sermon of March 21, 1686, *Substance of Sermons delivered by several Ministers in Boston*, recorded by Cotton Mather, Huntington Library MS, p. 76.

⁸Thomas Shepard, *The Sincere Convert: Discovering the small number of True Believers, and the Great Difficulty of Saving Conversion* (London, 1672), p. 3.

⁹Thomas Shepard, *A Short Catechism Familiarly Teaching The Knowledge of God, and of our Selves* (Cambridge, Mass., 1654), p. 15.

it reaches ye very thoughts of ye Heart.”¹⁰ John Eliot, minister and missionary to the Indians from the church at Roxbury, Massachusetts, taught his indigenous flocks that “the writings of the Bible are the very Words of God.”¹¹

The high opinion of the Bible held by the Puritan clergy is not only evident from their belief in divine authorship, but also from the very names and descriptions they used when referring to the Scriptures. In countless sermons the Bible was spoken of as the “Word of God.” This appears to have been the clergy’s favorite designation for the Bible, although numerous other titles and descriptive phrases were used which also demonstrate the highest regard for biblical authority. Emphasis on the truthfulness of the Word is found in epithets such as “word of truth,” “great store-house of truth,” and “Scriptures of truth.”¹² In other sermon passages the Bible is called “ye eternal word,” “the Holy Scriptures,” “the Sacred Word,” “the infallible Oracles,” “his [God’s] revealed will,” “the Sword of the Spirit,” “the RULE,” “the purest spiritual milk in the world,” “a treasure,” and “infinite wisdom.”¹³

Direct statements were frequently made in the clergy’s sermons and writings which leave little doubt that biblical infallibility was accepted dogma. Not only was the Bible viewed as the Word of God, it was also seen as absolutely reliable, accurate, and complete. The

¹⁰Increase Mather, Sermon of 1686, *Substance of Sermons*, p. 277.

¹¹John Eliot, *Tears of Repentance: Or, a further Narrative of the Progress of the gospel Amongst the Indians in New England* (London, 1653), p. 39.

¹²John Cotton, *The Way of Life* (London, 1641), p. 139; Increase Mather, Sermons of March 21 and March 28, 1686, *Substance of Sermons*, pp. 73, 96; Josiah Flynt, sermon [1670s], Harvard University MS, p. 166; Samuel Willard, *The Mourners Cordial Against Excessive Sorrow* (Boston, 1691), p. 65; Increase Mather, *The Mystery of Israel’s Salvation Explained and Applied* (London, 1669), p. 18.

¹³Increase Mather, Sermon of 1686, *Substance of Sermons*, p. 277; *Brief Discourse Concerning the Unlawfulness of the Common Prayer Worship, and of Laying the Hand on, and Kissing the Booke in Swearing* (Cambridge, Mass., 1686), p. 6; Cotton Mather, *Optanda* (Boston, 1692), p. 31; Samuel Willard, *Impenitent Sinners Warned of their Misery and Summoned to Judgment* (Boston, 1698), p. 32; *The Barren Fig Trees Doom* (Boston, 1691), p. 76; Urian Oakes, *The Unconquerable, All-Conquering, & more-than-conquering Souldier* (Cambridge, Mass., 1674), p. 26; Cotton Mather, *Early Religion* (Boston, 1694), p. 14; John Eliot, *The Harmony of the Gospels* (Boston, 1678), p. 32; Josiah Flynt, sermon [1670s], p. 274; Thomas Shepard, sermon [1641], Harvard University MS, n.p.

Scriptures were “a perfect rule of Faith & Holyness, according to which all doctrines are to be tryed, and all controversies decided.”¹⁴ The Word was “a perfect directory, shewing us how we must Serve God, and how we must Serve the Generation wherein we live.”¹⁵ Because a holy God had authored the Word it followed logically to the Puritans that the Scriptures were “the infallible Oracles of that God who cannot ly.”¹⁶ Cotton Mather referred to “those unerring Oracles” and the “Holy and Just and Good Laws of the Lord.” Thomas Shepard called “the voice of the Scriptures, the highest of all”; John Cotton asserted that “the perfection of the Word of God may well be concluded”; and Samuel Danforth preached about “the Holy Scriptures, which are the Authentick and unerring Canon of Truth.” John Eliot declared that “the Law of God, written in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament” is “pure, holy, righteous, perfect, and good. . . the perfect Systeme or Frame of Laws, to guide all the Moral actions of man,” and Richard Mather declared that “the Word is never contrary to it self.” But perhaps John Davenport, minister at Boston, put it most emphatically as he declared with a biblical citation, “The whole Scripture is breathed of God, and therefore infallible, and stamped with God’s own authority in every sentence of it, 2 Tim. 3.16.”¹⁷

The Bible as the Word of God was viewed as a complete revelation, containing everything God would have mankind to know about things of the spirit, as well as much about the flesh. Any group which did not share this perspective was anathema to New England’s Puritan divines. The Quakers were singled out for special

¹⁴Shepard, *Short Catechism*, p. 14.

¹⁵Increase Mather, *David Serving His Generation* (Boston, 1698), p. 11.

¹⁶Willard, *Impenitent Sinners*, p. 32.

¹⁷Cotton Mather, *Warnings from the Dead* (Boston, 1693), p. 4; *Humiliations follow’d with Deliverances* (Boston, 1697), pp. 4-5; Thomas Shepard, *Subjection to Christ in all His Ordinances and Appointments, the best means to preserve our Liberty* (London, 1652), p. 153; John Cotton, *Some Treasure Fetched out of Rubbish* (London, 1650), p. 11; Samuel Danforth, *An Astronomical Description of the Late Comet or Blazing Star, Together With a brief Theological Application thereof* (Cambridge, Mass., 1665), p. 16; John Eliot, *The Christian Commonwealth* (London, 1659), pp. 4, 35; Richard Mather, *An Answer to Two Questions* (Boston, 1712), p. 21; John Davenport, *Gods Call to His People to Turn unto Him* (Cambridge, Mass., 1669), p. 7.

condemnation in regard to their view of the completeness of the biblical revelation. In 1690 four prominent divines collaborated in a written attack against Quakerism, centered on that sect's belief in an "inner revelation" which implied that the Bible did not contain all the Word of God.¹⁸ To be a Quaker was, in Puritan eyes, to believe "that God hath one Rule to direct his people Outwardly, and another Inwardly, or as if God taught us one thing by His Word, and another by His Spirit . . . how perniciously this undermines the Christian faith."¹⁹ In one of his anti-Quaker tirades, Cotton Mather lashed out against the "Grievous Wolves" of Quakerism ready to snap at New England's "Little Flocks." "What Religion shall we have," he asked, "if the Scriptures once come to be vile in our opinion of them? Now to withdraw men from the esteem and study of the Scriptures, has hitherto been the main Design of Quakerism."²⁰ Such a criticism was doubtless among the worst that could be leveled at anyone in seventeenth-century New England.

Not only was the Bible viewed as God's inspired and complete revelation, but this divine and hence ageless inspiration was seen as present throughout the entire Old and New Testaments. When it came to Holy Writ, there was "no part unprofitable."²¹ The result was the use of sermon texts from all parts of the Bible with little preference being expressed by the clergy as a whole for one Testament over the other. The idea that the Puritans preached primarily from the OT is without foundation.²² The Bible in its entirety was accepted as the Word of God, a book for all time, applicable as much to the present as it was to the past, in principle if not in every ritualistic detail. Cotton Mather proclaimed that "the blessed suitableness of this miraculous Book unto the Affayrs and Concerns

¹⁸James Allen, Cotton Mather, Joshua Moodey, Samuel Willard, *The Principles of the Protestant Religion Maintained* (Boston, 1690), pp. 7, 16, 20-21.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, p. 7.

²⁰Cotton Mather, *Little Flocks Guarded Against Grievous Wolves* (Boston, 1691), p. 4.

²¹John Danforth, *Kneeling to God, at Parting with Friends* (Boston, 1697), p. 5.

²²My analysis of 466 extant sermons from five New England towns shows that 196 (42.1 percent) were based on OT texts whereas 270 (57.9 percent) were based on NT texts.

of all men, is to be found . . . in every part thereof.”²³ John Cotton testified that “I never yet observed any part of a Scripture . . . but without carnall affectation, or straining of wit, it might holily be applyed both with power and profit, and delight to an honest heart.”²⁴ Samuel Willard, in referring to the relevance of Scripture for the present, stated that “Scripture Counsels, when directed indefinitely, are for the most part, intended universally; where the Spirit of God doth not set any limitations, neither should we.”²⁵ The Word was binding on the current generation; it was “the Rule according to which we must believe.”²⁶ It was a Word from God containing “particular Instructions to us” with a message valid “to this day.”²⁷ It was acknowledged that although the Bible did not contain a precept for every detail of human experience, yet general principles were always present and applicable, ready to guide the faithful searcher of the pages of Scripture. When Puritans faced situations not specifically covered in the Bible they maintained that such matters could be clarified by deductions from the Bible.

2. *Scripture Documentation in Puritan Sermons*

The Puritan clergy’s complete dependence on the Bible as their authoritative source in matters of faith and practice can be seen by the way they carefully documented their sermon statements with biblical references. Every homily was based on a specific biblical text and to preach a sermon in seventeenth-century New England without such a base would have been unthinkable. The Bible was the source from which flowed all important theological ideas and the body of each sermon generally contained dozens of Scripture citations. Sometimes verses were quoted, and other times merely chapter and verse references were given. The important thing was to

²³Cotton Mather, *Military Duties Recommended to an Artillery Company* (Boston, 1687), p. 2.

²⁴John Cotton, *Of the Holiness of Church Members* (London, 1650), p. 69.

²⁵Samuel Willard, *Heavenly Merchandize* (Boston, 1686), p. 4.

²⁶Increase Mather, *David Serving*, p. 10.

²⁷Nathaniel Cookin, Sermon of May or June, 1690, *Sermon Notes*, p. 87; John Cotton, *A Brief Exposition of the whole Book of Canticles, or, Song of Solomon* (London, 1642), title page.

demonstrate that what was said had Scriptural grounds and was not of mere error-prone human origin.

Nearly every Puritan divine sprinkled his sermons and treatises liberally with biblical references, but few were more fastidious in this regard than Boston's famous pastor, John Cotton. In a catechism designed for children he prepared sixty-two questions and answers, buttressing the answers with sixty-six OT passages and 106 citations from the NT.²⁸ In a thirteen-page tract on the nature of the church, Cotton found it advantageous to employ 105 biblical references.²⁹ In another treatise on the doctrine of the church, Cotton in twelve pages stated and supported his views on ecclesiology with over 400 different Scripture references.³⁰

The Puritan faithful were exhorted from the pulpits of New England that not only was the Bible an authoritative source in matters of faith and practice, but it was the only reliable source. As four ministers in their joint defense of the faith expressed it, "We have no other Rule to inform our selves by, but the Scriptures."³¹ Those who succumbed to the ideas of men rather than the sure Word of God were violating a central Puritan tenet. "Such is the lamentable corruption of mens nature," bemoaned Increase Mather, "that they are more apt to be taken with fond, foolish, false prophecies that have nothing of a divine inspiration in them, than with the blessed and holy prophecies contained in the Scriptures of truth."³² Mather further reminded the saints that "we are not to walk by the opinions of this or that good Man, but by the Scriptures."³³ His son Cotton was of like mind:

The Rule according to which Conscience is to proceed . . . is, the word of God; or what God has revealed in the Sacred Scriptures. Not the opinions

²⁸John Cotton, *Milk for Babes Drawn Out of the Breasts of both Testaments* (London, 1646).

²⁹John Cotton, *The True Constitution of a particular visible Church, proved by Scripture* (London, 1642).

³⁰John Cotton, *The Doctrine of the Church, to which are committed the Keys of the Kingdom of Heaven*, 2d ed. (London, 1643).

³¹Allen, et al., *Principles Maintained*, p. 16.

³²Increase Mather, *Mystery of Israel's Salvation*, p. 74.

³³Increase Mather, *An Arrow Against Profane and Promiscuous Dancing Drawn out of the Quiver of the Scriptures* (Boston, 1684), p. 26.

and practices of men; nor indeed any suggestions but what are Consonant unto the Faithful sayings of our Bible.³⁴

John Wilson, troubled by the “dreamers of this generation,” warned his flock in 1677, “O do not hearken to these Dreamers, but hearken to the holy Word of God. . . . One word from the Lord is to be preferred before all other matters.”³⁵ Increase Mather boldly asserted “the perfection and fulness of the Scripture against all Traditions and Canons devised by men.”³⁶ John Cotton was perturbed by men acting of their own accord “without some light from some Scripture,” the erroneous result of which “is to make a mans selfe wise above that which is written.”³⁷ Urian Oakes of the church at Cambridge admonished fellow clergy and laity alike that in matters of Christian service they had “great reason to examine our selves, and bring all our services to the test and touchstone of the Word of God.”³⁸ Josiah Flynt of Dorchester, Massachusetts, put it bluntly in a sermon preached in the 1670s when he declared, “Without the word, there is nothing but ignorance, & therefore must needs be unbeleefe.”³⁹

3. *Puritan Emphasis on Practical Uses of Scripture*

Of what use, then, was this divinely inspired, complete, infallible Word of God to New England Puritans of the seventeenth century? As God’s message to mankind, the Bible was believed to possess great power and utility, able to touch the daily lives of saints and sinners. Foremost among the uses attributed to the Word was its ability to point the way to salvation through Christ. It did this first by exposing men as God saw them: “The Word of God gives a full demonstration of the natural state of all mankind; it tells us both what we are, and how we came to be so; it declares the wrath of

³⁴Cotton Mather, *A Companion for Communicants* (Boston, 1690), p. 86.

³⁵John Wilson, *A Seasonable Watch-Word Unto Christians Against the Dreams & Dreamers Of this Generation* (Cambridge, Mass., 1677), p. 5.

³⁶Increase Mather, *David Serving*, p. 21.

³⁷John Cotton, *The Bloudy Tenent Washed, And made white in the bloud of the Lambe* (London, 1647), p. 43.

³⁸Urian Oakes, *A Seasonable Discourse Wherein Sinceritie & Delight in the Service of God is earnestly pressed upon Professors of Religion* (Cambridge, Mass., 1682), p. 8.

³⁹Josiah Flynt, sermon [1670s], p. 261.

God, and shews how man came to be subjected to it; it convinceth by clear and plain evidence.”⁴⁰ The Word was “of singular benefit to discover to people what sinne is” and was likened by Josiah Flynt to a trumpet which was “to be sounded in the ears of sinners” in order to awaken the “secure sinner” to his plight.⁴¹ James Allen spoke of sin being revealed “by seeing your selves in the glass of the Word.”⁴² Cotton Mather also spoke of the Word as “the GLASS, which gives Young People, to see the Uncleaness of their Wayes” and also “the SPUR, which moves Young People, to seek a Cure for the Uncleaness of their Wayes.”⁴³ The Word contained the “great voice of God . . . to every sinner,” and it was “the great design of the Scriptures” to declare “that the Sinner who shall turn from all his sins shall live, but the Sinner that will not turn from all his Sins shall dye forever.”⁴⁴

The Word was depicted in less severe terms by John Cotton as he spoke of the “attractive drawing power that is found in the word of truth, and goodnesse of the Gospell of Christ,”⁴⁵ and by Increase Mather as he referred to the Bible as “a gracious Letter which Christ has sent from heaven, inviting who will, to come to him and be saved by him.”⁴⁶ William Adams, amazed at “what heart-breakings and soul-meltings there are under the word of God,” believed that the purpose of the Word was to “move and work kindly & sweetly upon the heart to persuade, to draw, to instruct, to correct, to awe, to unite the heart to God.”⁴⁷ Josiah Flynt proclaimed that the “summe and substance of the Gospell” was to declare the “reconciliation made by Christ for sinners.”⁴⁸ To the Puritans, God in his

⁴⁰Samuel Willard, *Mercy Magnified on a Penitent Prodigal* (Boston, 1684), p. 98.

⁴¹John Cotton, *Christ the Fountaine of Life* (London, 1651), p. 187; Josiah Flynt, sermon [1670s], p. 11.

⁴²James Allen, *Mans Self-Reflection Is the Special Means to further his Recovery from his Apostacy from God* (Boston, 1699), p. 27.

⁴³Cotton Mather, *Early Religion*, pp. 14-15.

⁴⁴Increase Mather, *The Greatest Sinners Exhorted and Encouraged To Come to Christ, and that Now Without Delaying* (Boston, 1686), p. 45.

⁴⁵Cotton, *Way of Life*, p. 139.

⁴⁶Increase Mather, *Greatest Sinners*, p. 16.

⁴⁷William Adams, “The Necessity of the Pouring out of the Spirit,” in *Dedham Pulpit*, ed. E. Burgess (Boston, 1840), p. 61.

⁴⁸Josiah Flynt, sermon [1670s], p. 152.

sovereignty had ordained that the Word be instrumental in transmitting the message of redemption, making it "the power of God to salvation" and using it for "the pricking of the heart."⁴⁹ According to Samuel Willard, "the Gospel is the great instrument of Gods Appointment for Conversion."⁵⁰

The Puritan clergy not only extolled the virtues of the Bible as the way to salvation, but they also drew upon it for guidance in daily living. New England Puritanism was a blending of the theoretical and the practical, with attention given both to systematic doctrines and their application. The centrality of the Word in Puritan thought is further demonstrated by the way in which biblical examples and teachings were constantly held up as the standard for a Christian society.

Ministers frequently reminded their congregations of the Bible's usefulness as the rule and example which the people of God were required to follow. John Cotton let his hearers know that the Scriptures were given for instruction, teaching, and admonition and that the episodes recorded in Holy Writ "are of singular use of direction for the Church of God."⁵¹ Samuel Willard exhorted his flock to value the Word, telling them it would direct them into the right path, be a friend and companion at all times, stay with them through all sorts of adversity, lift their spirits when in deepest dejection, enable them to commune with God himself, and support and carry them through the agonies of death.⁵² The Scriptures were, according to Joshua Moodey, "the Christians' Apothecaries Shop where he may go and take freely what his occasions call for. If a man needs Reproof, Correction, Doctrine, Instruction, &c. all these are there to be had."⁵³

It was the word of God that was the "ordinary and visible way of Gods teaching"⁵⁴ and informed the people of God about "sundry

⁴⁹Cotton, *Way of Life*, pp. 162, 171.

⁵⁰Willard, *Fig Trees Doom*, p. 25.

⁵¹John Cotton, *Singing of Psalmes a Gospel Ordinance* (London, 1647), p. 36; *Way of Life*, p. 124.

⁵²Willard, *Heavenly Merchandize*, pp. 76-80.

⁵³Joshua Moodey, *The Believers happy Change by Dying* (Boston, 1697), pp. 3-4.

⁵⁴James Allen, *Neglect of Supporting and Maintaining the Pure Worship of God, By the Professing People of God is a God-provoking and Land-Wasting Sin* (Boston, 1687), p. 7.

things which else they had not known." The Word not only informed, but also served "to stir them up to do such things which they wel knew should be done."⁵⁵ Samuel Willard reminded his congregation that believers were to "walk in conformity to the Rules of Gods Word, frame their lives in all things according to it."⁵⁶ John Norton explained that special attention ought to be given to the examples of biblical characters since God had seen fit to make "a considerable part of the Scripture . . . a divine testimony of what the Faithful have done and suffered."⁵⁷ It was a rare election sermon in seventeenth-century Massachusetts that did not urge the electorate in one way or another to "let your choice be guided by the word of God" when it came to selecting suitable leadership.⁵⁸

It is clear that the Bible was regarded by the Puritan faithful as the rule of faith and practice, the guide to salvation, and a volume filled with examples and teachings to be heeded. The Scriptures had value for them in other areas as well. The Bible pointed the way to happiness, provided growth and depth in the Christian experience, helped the saints to resist sin, warned the saints of the dangers of disobedience, laid the foundations for a just government, and gave the saints comfort. And in a world of wickedness, the Puritan saint could say with Thomas Shepard, "When we are mocked and scorned of men of the World, let us look into the Bible, and we shall find bags of Promises, true treasure, and therein let us rejoyce."⁵⁹

4. *Puritan Clergy's Emphasis on Response to the Word*

In light of claims made for the Bible by the Puritan clergy, it is not surprising that considerable emphasis in their sermons was placed on a proper response to the Word. The importance of a daily reading of the Scriptures was stressed. Cotton Mather urged his flock to "let not a Day ordinarily pass you, wherein you will not

⁵⁵Cotton, *Christ the Fountaine*, p. 179.

⁵⁶Willard, *Fig Trees Doom*, p. 41.

⁵⁷John Norton, *Abel being Dead yet Speaketh* (London, 1658), p. 4.

⁵⁸James Allen, *New Englands choicest Blessing And the Mercy most to be desired by all that wish well to this People* (Boston, 1679), p. 7.

⁵⁹Cotton Mather, *Early Religion*, p. 4; Increase Mather, *Practical Truths Tending to Promote the Power of Godliness* (Boston, 1682), p. 142; sermon of March 14, 1686, and undated sermons, *Substance of Sermons*, pp. 38, 50, 277, 278.

Read some portion of it, with a due Meditation and Supplication over it.”⁶⁰ When he became concerned that Bible-reading was not being taken with the utmost seriousness, Mather became vehement. While reading the Word, he asserted, God may well meet the deepest longings and greatest needs of the soul. “Can you not read a Bible, as well as a Gazet, or a Romance?” he scathingly queried his congregation.⁶¹ Another congregation was even encouraged that “when you cannot read, be sure you meditate upon some part of Gods Word, every day, and every night.”⁶²

Not only was the reading of Scripture urged, but so was its memorization. Having the Word hidden in the heart and bringing an appropriate passage to remembrance was “ye best way in ye world” to resist temptation.⁶³ Cotton Mather urged his hearers to take special care to bring their children to a knowledge of salvation and to teach them to memorize Scripture.⁶⁴ In one of his published catechisms, Mather began his questioning with “What should young-people count the most necessary or commendable thing that can be spoken of them?” He answered with a passage of Scripture: “2 Tim. 3.15. From a Child thou hast known the holy Scriptures which are able to make thee wise unto Salvation.”⁶⁵ John Cotton urged his congregation to take the Word and “hide it in our hearts, so that we might not sinne against God, Psal. 119.11.”⁶⁶ The ideal for young and old alike was “to be ready in the Scriptures, like a ready scribe, that can draw out of his Quiver a fitting arrow for every case.”⁶⁷

The saints were urged to give a full measure of concentration to the study of the Bible, both through the private reading of it and the hearing of Bible-based sermons. John Cotton’s congregation was

⁶⁰Cotton Mather, *Military Duties*, p. 68. See also *Small Offers Towards the Service of the Tabernacle in the Wilderness* (Boston, 1689), p. 26.

⁶¹Cotton Mather, *Unum Necessarium* (Boston, 1693), p. 46.

⁶²Cotton, *Christ the Fountaine*, p. 207.

⁶³Increase Mather, sermon [1686], *Substance of Sermons*, p. 278.

⁶⁴Cotton Mather, *A Family Well-Ordered* (Boston, 1699), p. 19.

⁶⁵Cotton Mather, *Scriptural Catechism*, p. 1.

⁶⁶Cotton, *Christ the Fountaine*, p. 136.

⁶⁷Eliot, *Harmony of the Gospels*, p. 63.

urged to “FEED upon the WORD,”⁶⁸ while Cotton Mather admonished his flock to “Eat well, that we may Walk well. . . . Let us by a Contemplative Eating chew upon the Word of God.”⁶⁹ When it came to the hearing of the Word at divine worship, Satan was credited with realizing the importance of the Word being preached, and thus “it comes to pass that men are most sleepy at Sermon time,” said Increase Mather. “Before the Sermon began, they were not drowsie, and after the Sermon is ended, they are not so; but just at that season, when they are called to attend the word of God, they are apt to drowse and sleep. This is as Satan would have it.”⁷⁰

Other congregations were urged to “digg and dive into the rich Mines of Scripture”; to “be diligent in the search & study of the holy Scriptures”; to “be found in, and cleave to the way of the Rule, the way of Gods Word”; to “stick close to the guidance of the Scriptures, and love them”; to “stand in aw of the Word and with Reverence to receive and attend it”; to “let the word of God speake, & doe thou heare what it saith”; and “to study the Lord’s will, to be frequent in the Scriptures, searching out the mind of God there, for your direction.”⁷¹

To those who did not give the Word its proper place, the warnings were dire enough. Increase Mather thundered that those who repeatedly heard the Bible preached and yet did not heed God’s Word and became converted would find themselves “at ye Last Day . . . in ye Lowest Hell.”⁷² A startling example of the heinousness of neglecting the Word comes from the confession of James Morgan, convicted of murder in 1686. In his public confession, recorded by

⁶⁸Cotton, *Christ the Fountaine*, p. 134.

⁶⁹Cotton Mather, *Early Piety* (London, 1689), p. 20.

⁷⁰Increase Mather, *Practical Truths*, p. 199.

⁷¹Increase Mather, *The Mystery of Christ Opened and Applied* (Boston, 1686), p. 43; Richard Mather, *A Farewell Exhortation to the Church and People of Dorchester in New England* (Cambridge, Mass., 1657), p. 6; Jonathan Mitchell, *Nehemiah on the Wall in Troublesom Times* (Cambridge, Mass., 1667), p. 27; Thomas Shepard, *The Parable of the Ten Virgins Opened & Applied* (London, 1660), p. 151; William Adams, *God’s Eye on the Contrite* (Boston, 1685), p. 4; Josiah Flynt, sermon [1670s], p. 54; Samuel Willard, *The Duty of a People that have Renewed their Covenant with God* (Boston, 1680), p. 8.

⁷²Increase Mather, sermon of March 14, 1686, *Substance of Sermons*, p. 53.

Increase Mather, Morgan admitted to the murder, but that act was not his greatest regret. "The sin which lieth most heavey upon my Conscience, is," he maintained, "that I have despised the Word of God, and many a time refused to hear it preached."⁷³

5. Conclusion

It can be clearly seen from the sermons and writings of the clergy in seventeenth-century New England that the importance and influence of the Bible to Puritan orthodoxy can scarcely be overstated. Without doubt, the Word was held in the highest possible regard by the clergy. The names the clergy used for Scripture; their absolute faith in its divine authorship, infallibility, and uniqueness; their desire to base their sermons on nothing but Scripture texts properly interpreted; and their exhortations for all to study and follow biblical precepts—these constitute strong evidence of their dependence on, and reverence for, the Bible.

Furthermore, no sign of disagreement was found among the clergy concerning the nature and authority of the Bible. Theological disagreements in Puritan New England may have arisen in other areas, but throughout the seventeenth century, the Bible was the unquestioned Word of God.

It should be emphasized that the Puritans' high view of the Bible did not preclude a role for reason in their theological thinking. Perry Miller was correct that reason and logic were important in Puritan preaching, but he failed to realize that for the clergy, nothing in the realm of human reason ever took precedence over the Word. E.g., miracles, contrary to normal human experience, yet recorded in the Word, were accepted at face value. Also, reason alone could never have led to many of the theological positions held in all sincerity by the faithful.

In short, throughout the seventeenth century the Scriptures alone continued to stand as the basis of legitimacy for every aspect of Puritan Christianity, although at times this biblical support was less than explicit, with some passages being interpreted parochially in

⁷³Increase Mather, *Sermon Occasioned by the Execution of a Man found Guilty of Murder* (Boston, 1686), pp. 27-28.

light of current attitudes. Nonetheless, the clergy and the faithful of seventeenth-century New England were, perhaps to a degree never surpassed before or since, a people of the Word. Only with such an awareness of the foundational role of the Bible can New England Puritanism be properly understood.